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Final report on the implementation of the pilot project on the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations

Report by the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In its recommendations to the General Assembly adopted on 11 May 2001, the Committee on Information requested the Secretary-General to submit to it by August 2001 a final report on the results of the pilot project on the development of an international broadcasting capacity for the United Nations. The Committee also decided to resume its twenty-third session to take up the final report on the implementation of the pilot project with a view to taking a final decision on the mandate and allocation of the necessary resources for the establishment of a permanent international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations during the main part of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly.

2. In his report to the Committee on Information at its twenty-third session (A/AC.198/2001/7), the Secretary-General stated that the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat had launched the radio pilot project on 28 August 2000, targeting audiences in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.

3. In its recommendations of 11 May 2001, the Committee on Information concurred with the Secretary-General that the implementation of the pilot project had been one of the more significant and successful examples of the reorientation of the Department of Public Information.

4. The present report is the final report on the implementation of the pilot project. It outlines the achievements so far, the reviews received and the advances anticipated if the live radio broadcast becomes a regular activity. Also included is an overview of the resource requirements for the establishment of an international broadcasting capacity for the United Nations beyond the pilot phase.

II. Overview

5. Since its inception in August 2000, the United Nations pilot radio project has harnessed the power of this compelling and popular medium to bring the Organization closer to the peoples it was created to serve. Its principal vehicle is a daily 15-minute live broadcast of international news from a United Nations perspective. Through its brisk coverage of breaking developments and its in-depth treatment of feature stories, United Nations Radio has succeeded in establishing itself as an important international broadcaster. Perhaps more important, however, the project has contributed to the Department's overall

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goal of generating understanding about the United Nations among millions of listeners across the globe.

6. By serving as a channel for the voices of United Nations officials and experts throughout the system, the project has raised awareness about their work, while at the same time giving voice to ordinary citizens who benefit from the Organization's activities, thus capturing and conveying complex efforts for peace, development, human rights and humanitarian relief in a clear and vivid manner.

7. The pilot project also constitutes a striking example of the Department's commitment to multilingualism. With daily broadcasts in each of the Organization's six official languages, the project provides a broad and sustained response to the call by Member States for respect for the principle of multilingualism.

8. The availability of an objective and high-quality 15-minute daily broadcast has been especially useful to media outlets, mainly in the developing world, that do not have a correspondent based at the United Nations. Even more noteworthy is the fact that a number of broadcasters that do retain United Nations correspondents have picked up the feed. By re-disseminating the United Nations radio broadcast while generating their own original material, these stations have further amplified the international coverage of the United Nations.

9. Additional evidence of the project's reach can be found in the many partnerships it has generated between the United Nations and national and local broadcasters around the world. Each partnership represents a major gain for the Organization, demonstrating that its programming is regarded highly enough to be granted 15 minutes of valuable airtime.

10. While one of the main goals of the project has been to develop partnerships with developing countries, communications outlets in developed States, such as Australia, Belgium, Ireland and the United States of America, have also expressed an interest in receiving and broadcasting the daily feeds from United Nations Radio. Such cooperation would represent a further opportunity to generate understanding among an even wider audience of how the Organization is working to fulfil the needs of the world's people.

III. Programme development and content

11. The 15-minute programme produced in the six official languages of the United Nations consists of news, background information and reports about peacekeeping, humanitarian and other activities of the United Nations system. The live programme provides an opportunity to enhance the cooperation within the United Nations system to generate and disseminate more information. United Nations Radio has been able to build a dedicated audience as a result of its unique access to experts in the field. In addition to following in-house developments, radio producers are in regular contact with, among others, entities of the United Nations system, peacekeeping missions and United Nations information centres. They report for work early every morning and decide on the most important United Nations-related international news stories during their daily editorial meeting. Once the key stories for the day have been identified, the producers initiate telephone calls to country-based offices and peacekeeping missions in various parts of the world to arrange for interviews. Such contributions make up more than half the content and provide to listeners worldwide a unique United Nations perspective on global events. Furthermore, delegates from an increasing number of Member States have provided, and continue to provide, relevant content to the live radio programme.

12. An example of the newsworthiness of the daily transmissions was demonstrated last June, when United Nations Radio was able to link up with the then-President of the Security Council on the last day of the Council's mission to Kosovo. During his bus ride to the airport to board a flight back to New York, he provided United Nations Radio with a scoop, offering his assessment of the one-week mission. Similarly, on 7 May 2001, as United Nations Radio went on the air, it was able to report a major breaking news story relating to a dramatic siege in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

13. Among other reports, as the Secretary-General visited north-eastern Pakistan last March to witness the plight of thousands of Afghan refugees, United Nations Radio was at the Peshawar camp to share with its listeners their desperate situation. During the African Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Infectious Diseases, held in Abuja in April 2001, reports with delegates and experts were featured daily

on the live radio programme. Without the ability to transmit those reports live to a worldwide audience, such events would have been lost in the news clutter. More recently, during the three-day special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, the live radio broadcasts in all six official languages of the Organization, as well as the Portuguese news programme, devoted more than half of each day's 15-minute broadcasts to coverage of various aspects of the important issues discussed.

14. By continuing to tap the vast information reserve of the United Nations system, United Nations Radio can offer radio listeners and partner stations worldwide comprehensive and constant information on a range of issues central to the work of the United Nations. As the spirit of live United Nations Radio permeates the rest of the United Nations family, the broadcast products will become richer through the contribution of fresh reports from different United Nations offices located in different time zones.

IV. Partnerships

15. The broadcasts are currently disseminated to a large number of partner stations worldwide from Monday to Friday (including public holidays) and transmitted directly to audiences via shortwave and satellite in various regions of the world. The programme's partner stations include major broadcasters transmitting in each of the six official languages of the Organization, including China Radio International, Channel Africa, the Voice of Russia, Canal éducatif de la Francophonie and Radio Cairo. The most recent partnership was established with Radio Nacional de Venezuela.

16. In his previous report to the Committee on Information (A/AC.198/2001/7), the Secretary-General noted that the partner stations had provided feedback on the importance of the live radio broadcasts from the United Nations. They have continued to do so. One of our international shortwave partners, the Costa Rica-based Radio for Peace International, for example, has stated that the programme was of "great value to our listeners worldwide" and described the live 15-minute format as "dynamic" and providing a "spontaneity" not found in the previous format of weekly recorded programmes. ABC Radio in Mexico said:

> "For an independent radio station with a limited budget, it is too difficult to hire correspondents. United Nations Radio provides us with accurate international news and it has credibility, reinforcing the positive image the United Nations has among Mexicans."

Another station in Mexico has pointed out that the Spanish-language programme of United Nations Radio was "a direct source of information on international affairs. We particularly appreciate its coverage of social issues, such as health, population, environment and so on. Airing its materials adds to the prestige of our radio station." YSKL Network station in El Salvador has described the Spanish-language programme as "excellent", noting that "topics are very varied and of great importance to audiences both in El Salvador and abroad. It is used at 11 p.m. local time to close the news. It is very successful."

17. One Middle Eastern national partner radio station, Radio Abu Dhabi, thanked the staff of United Nations Radio for "their distinctive efforts in preparing interesting programmes with news, interviews and reports". Radio Nigeria reiterated the value of the live programmes in view of its inability to post correspondents at United Nations Headquarters and Radio Free Lebanon said it was keen to maintain its cooperation with United Nations Radio.

18. United Nations Radio will continue to expand partnerships with local, regional, national and private broadcasting organizations. For example, for the Russian-language live broadcast, discussions are under way to add Moscow-based Radio "Mayak" to the successful partnership with Voice of Russia. Discussions are also under way with the Arab Satellite Communications Organization (ARABSAT) for the receipt of the live radio signal for distribution to Arabic-speaking countries, where United Nations Radio stands to gain 2 million potential listeners.

V. Feedback

19. In addition to the feedback from partner stations, the Department has also received feedback from individual listeners. A listener from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland wrote:

> "I find that your programmes are a useful source of information about important world events and

issues, particularly ones where the United Nations currently has a central role."

Another listener from the United Kingdom said:

"You certainly managed to pack a lot into that little broadcast. It is really interesting to have access to the United Nations by radio. I hope this is something that will continue to grow. Radio is so important."

One listener from the United States of America commented:

"This radio is one way that we can get the real truth about what the United Nations is doing".

A letter from a listener in France stated:

"It is necessary to have information on the United Nations work and radio remains one of the best media to accomplish this mission."

From Cameroon, one listener wrote:

"I am a regular listener to United Nations Radio broadcasting. I especially enjoy the news, which is full of interesting stories. United Nations Radio has given me so much knowledge about the United Nations and the rest of the world."

From Nakuru, Kenya, another listener sent in this note:

"Thank you very much for the good work you do, for giving people timely and good information from all around the world. The work that you do deserves honour and congratulations from us your listeners. Some of the news that you broadcast to us is very educative, interesting and also encouraging."

20. Writing from north-west China, a listener stated:

"I grew up in an orphanage and have never been to school. I studied by myself. Through your programme, I have learnt what the United Nations is doing worldwide and in China. The United Nations is doing a lot of charitable things helping the poor. I feel emotionally attached to your programme."

A high school student from Shanghai wrote:

"I am a loyal listener of United Nations Radio. I would like to let you know that your programme has been a window to the outside world from my boarding school, enabling me to be aware of what is happening worldwide. Through your broadcast, you succeed in delivering the message of peace, friendship and mutual benefit to us. I will always listen to your programmes."

A union worker in central China wrote:

"United Nations Radio keeps me well-informed and connected with the rest of the world. It has given me a different voice from a new angle. I particularly like your news stories. However, as a Chinese listener, I would like to know more about how China plays a role in the United Nations."

Writing from Negombo, Sri Lanka, a listener said:

"I was very pleased to hear that United Nations has returned to the air after such a long break. I listened to your programme last night and I am pleased to report that the reception here in Sri Lanka was excellent ... Indeed, the quality of the reception was similar to that of BBC transmissions to South Asia ... I am truly happy that the United Nations has returned to the shortwave radio, probably the only media that can be globally accessed by the millions of people who depend on it most for peace, health and welfare."

21. The Department of Public Information was appreciative of Member States' comments about the project during the first part of the twenty-third session of the Committee on Information. Many delegations underscored the primacy of radio as the most used and available traditional medium and expressed widespread support for the pilot project for the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations and the role of the Department in enabling developing nations to meet their information and communications needs. One Member State said that the launch of the pilot project for the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the Organization was a milestone in the history of United Nations Radio. It had been able to establish a direct, immediate and effective daily channel of communication with the world's broadcast media and, through them, to a vast global audience. Another delegation commented that the pilot project had made a positive contribution to the lives of people who could not be reached by other media.

VI. Distribution

22. The live programme has also contributed to the enhancement of distribution methods of United Nations radio products. Cooperative arrangements have been made directly with an increasing number of partner stations to deliver the United Nations message to audiences around the world. The Department of Public Information has made arrangements with a communications company to provide shortwave transmissions to Africa and the Middle East in three languages, Arabic, English and French. Simultaneous arrangements have been made with a satellite provider to transmit the programme to partner stations in the Caribbean.

23. The Department also continues to use its own facilities to distribute the programme. The International Broadcasting Centre at Headquarters is used to provide analogue telephone transmissions for rebroadcast in the six official languages worldwide to partner stations and to shortwave and satellite providers. Improving audio quality and connection reliability with partner stations through satellite delivery is a priority. The capacity to deliver the daily programmes to partner stations via satellite, in particular, will ensure consistent audio quality and reception. However, the cost of downloading the satellite signal will remain a continuing challenge for individual radio stations.

24. Expanding shortwave coverage to the vast expanses of the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in areas not yet served by FM infrastructure is part of the envisioned overall diffusion package. The much-anticipated introduction of digital short wave will soon provide FM-quality reception to listeners in Africa, the Middle East and any other region where short wave is part of the radio culture.

25. Electronic file transfer via the Internet is also used in delayed transmission of the programme to partner stations. Distribution via the Internet allows radio stations to access and rebroadcast the programme without having to contact United Nations Radio directly, which potentially enhances the number of partner stations worldwide. Moreover, the "re-purposing" of the live United Nations radio outputs for the web is a cost-effective way to meet the calls for the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site. In its resolution 50/11 of 2 November 1995, the General Assembly emphasized the importance of providing access for all Governments and all sectors of civil society to the Organization's documentation, archives and databanks in all the official languages. Since then, parity in the use of the six official languages has been stressed and the re-purposing of original outputs of United Nations Radio in the six official languages for the web does not entail translation costs.

VII. Looking ahead

26. The new culture of producing and distributing relevant and timely radio products will be reinforced through cost-effective production techniques and tools. As part of the upgrading of the radio and television facilities, the Department is acquiring an electronic news production system that will permit both easy news gathering and radio editing on the desktop, as well as seamless integration with broadcast and distribution equipment.

27. Promotion activities in support of the live radio broadcast also continue. A database with close to 2,000 entries of Russian-language radio stations was recently developed. That project will be replicated gradually to capture data from radio stations broadcasting in the other official languages of the Organization. While database building could take time, the long-term benefits for electronic promotion are tangible. Media alerts can be sent several times per day. Also, sharing of information about electronic downloads will contribute towards the bridging of the digital divide, as radio stations in the developing world will learn about cost-effective production technology.

VIII. Resources

28. To implement the pilot project, the General Assembly requested the Department to utilize resources already approved in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001 and extrabudgetary resources to the fullest extent possible. It was estimated that the cost of the project for the 12-month period ending 31 August 2001 would be $1.3 million and would amount to $1.9 million through 31 December 2001. Extrabudgetary funding in support of the radio pilot project was not available. Consequently, the Department took measures to absorb the cost with regard to personnel, equipment, physical plant, distribution and promotion relating to the pilot project.

In the absence of a legislative mandate for the continuation of the project beyond the pilot phase, it has not been possible to include resource provisions for the continuation of the project in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003.

29. Should the General Assembly decide to continue the project during the biennium 2002-2003, it is estimated that resources totalling approximately $3.5 million would be required.